



Pre LGR Peer- Challenge for Somerset

6th - 8th December 2022

Feedback report



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1. Context and background

The LGA were pleased to support the delivery of a peer challenge in advance of the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Somerset, which takes effect from April 2023.

The changes planned will see the creation of one new unitary council for Somerset, to be called Somerset Council, which will cover the footprint of the existing county council boundary. Therefore, the current district councils, Somerset West and Taunton, Mendip, Sedgemoor and South Somerset will cease to exist on 31 March 2023.

The LGR process will see profound change, but one that has real aspirations for the county and the people the new council will serve. ‘....to improve lives of residents, businesses and communities – everyone wants better outcomes for the people and businesses of Somerset and local government that is fit to support them and drive that improvement’ (extract from LGR Business Case for One Somerset)

Each of the current Somerset councils have always embraced sector led improvement and challenge. Indeed, each of the districts as well as the county council are absolutely committed to ensuring the new authority starts well, and so we were not surprised that there was a collective will from them to welcome a peer team in. However, the timing of this just four months out from vesting day, means that we were keen to provide a timely, supportive and improvement focussed peer challenge, that would add value to, and not detract from, the change programme. This is important as everyone we know seems fully committed to starting their new council as they mean to continue, on the front foot.

This peer challenge was therefore designed to be ‘light touch’ and largely had an internal focus, offering a view on progress, challenges and peer suggestions for change/improvement. It was not a Corporate Peer Challenge [Corporate Peer Challenge | Local Government Association](#), nor a model of assurance. It is positive to see that the political leadership of the new council has already ‘signed up’ to welcome a more fundamental review within the first 12-18 months of its existence, and that is to be applauded.

The report that follows highlights the peer teams main findings, key reflections and suggestions for the council's leadership to consider as they approach April 2023 (and beyond). Finally, it offers a peer perspective on the three main areas we spent time with stakeholders discussing and this is captured in the main body of the report.

2. Main Findings

Section 1 of this report highlights the key LGR drivers for change and the implications for a single unitary Somerset Council. It doesn't describe the context of the change and turbulence that has characterised the last 2-3 years with the cost-of-living crisis, pandemic and wider national and global issues. These may be easily referenced in this short paragraph but the implications for local government, and in this context Somerset, should not be underestimated or downplayed, especially when coupled with the LGR drivers referred to. This really is a most significant change and at a challenging time.

What shone through from the peer's engagement with all those we met with in Somerset, was that despite the various starting positions that were held at the time when the 2 business cases for LGR were submitted, all stakeholders we met universally agreed that the status quo was not an option; change was needed and is welcomed.

That mandate for change has now resulted in one council with a new political administration – one that has a clear majority in the council chamber. We found that the council's new leadership is fully committed to delivering the LGR aspirations and much more besides and this is very encouraging. Furthermore, they have been ably supported by the LGR Programme Board (in essence the chief executives for the current authorities), who have worked collaboratively to support the change process - that level of collaboration across the existing councils has been a real measure of success and is not universal to all similar change programmes.

Throughout the last 2 years the LGR programme that was established which underpins and ensures the delivery of the numerous workstreams of work, ranging from governance to people and culture, has served, and continues to serve Somerset well. It has been a real catalyst for change, fleet of foot, and with sufficient flex to

build in capacity, as and when the programme has needed additional impetus. All those working to support the programme of change have demonstrated their commitment to, as one told us 'Get this over the line well and together'.

There is real aspiration to set up the new council well, but there are clearly associated risks given the timescale and range of legislative actions that need to be completed. Importantly, those risks are well known across the programme and the new council leadership, Programme Board and LGR programme are working hard to mitigate them. Therefore, the peer team believe that everything is in place to ensure that Somerset Council will be a safe and legally functioning body from day 1, assuming the current progress and leadership is maintained.

Maintaining that leadership drive and capacity is key. The new Chief Executive for Somerset Council has only recently started in October 2022 and that has enabled the impetus, drive and pace, that we believe flatlined to some extent in the summer, to be reignited. His appointment is welcomed by all, as is his very early and clear mantra to staff, echoed loudly by the political administration, that the council being established in Somerset is a new one, and one that will develop its own specific culture. This is a key message, since the recognition of how the LGR change process has felt to staff has been very differently to date, dependent upon where they work and what their role is. The peer team recognise that for some of the technical change reasons around LGR, and because of the roles and functions individuals carry out, this has been to some extent inevitable. However, that message of one council, one set of ambitions and one culture will need to be driven and evidenced across every service area as the new council stands up.

There are some fantastic opportunities ahead. The new administration is keen to develop its future plans and agenda, which is positive. It wants, and we believe needs, to articulate its vision for the new council. In doing so they will be describing how their political ambitions, LGR benefits, and the promotion of Somerset regionally and nationally will be realised, not least through emerging Levelling Up legislation. This is a significant body of work, that will require a strong evidence base, strategic intent and a collective will to communicate and then lead on the delivery – this will be encapsulated within the Council Plan.

The success of the delivery of the Council Plan will be highly dependent on a range

of key supplementary issues and actions. The most profound being the need to underpin the vision and plan with a sustainable medium term financial plan and associated workforce strategy, both are mission critical and clearly need significant attention. Indeed, during the peer challenge we heard a range of differing views about the financial constraints that the new council may need to respond to and work within. The financial 'gap' has implications for the council budget for 2023/24 and beyond and it was described with a different £ figure associated with it, by several people we spoke with over just 2 days. Therefore, we advise a need for clarity of understanding and certainty of messaging as this is very important as the budget round in February 2023 draws near.

The horizon to ensure the necessary leadership and capacity, in terms of council senior officers, to achieve the above tasks and many more besides is very close. The decisions to be taken imminently, in relation to the appointment of what was referred to as 'tier 2 and 3 appointments' at the new council are crucial in many respects – that is the top circa 30 senior leadership posts, which will take most of January to complete. These appointments really will clarify who the council's future officer leaders are, it will create capacity, it will also signal the intent of the new council, and it will be crucial that these new appointees live and breathe the new Chief Executive's, and the political leadership's One Council concept.

These appointments, and the ones that then follow will also signal the need to recalibrate the balance of leadership and change as effectively as possible. Up to now this has sat with a relatively small number of people, primarily the Programme Board and the LGR change programme team. Soon that will shift as some people will be appointed to substantive roles in the new council, some people will leave, but the programme still needs to be delivered. It will be vital to maintain the focus on the delivery of the programme whilst at the same time ensuring those new into post with executive responsibility take up their leadership roles, appoint their staff, commission and deliver services and keep the programme on track - that is no mean feat.

The concept of Local Community Networks was outlined in the business cases for both LGR submissions. Therefore, they are recognised by all as the means of embracing the LGR benefits of being a large unitary council, but with significant 'tentacles' in local communities and properly grounded in the needs of local residents. The peer team found that there was a wide and sometimes widening set of

expectations for these networks, but in truth as one stakeholder told us ‘LCNs cannot become everything to everyone’, nor should they. Fortunately, the staff leading on this workstream from the LGR programme are absolutely focussed on the key practicalities involved and determined to help deliver something tangible. We cover our more detailed advice in the main body of the report, but in summary, we strongly advocate for clarity about their geography, structure and the level of resource being linked to each LCN, as this will give everyone a clear message and starting position. From then on, there will inevitably need to review and flex, and in truth there are real opportunities and milestones, such as boundary reviews to tie this to. Whatever they become, they must have a clear starting purpose, structure and resource.

Given this peer challenge was essentially internally focussed we didn’t meet a wide range of external stakeholders. However, we were warmly welcomed and engaged by some of the VCS partners in Somerset and they are clearly a great asset. The meeting we had with the VCS showed us that the new council can benefit much from their engagement, as it progresses LCNs and wider models of service delivery and design. The opportunities for a strong effective framework of engagement and co-production with such partners shone through and the council should use this great change process window of opportunity to exploit this. Similarly, the support from SALC – Somerset Association for Local Council’s – was apparent, from our meeting with them and from what we saw and heard. The engagement with them on this journey has been very much welcomed. It will be important to maintain this as the LCN’s evolve and take shape in these local communities.

Our verbal feedback to political and officer leaders in Somerset at the end of the peer challenge was that they are ready for day 1; vesting day is on track (although the programme holds significant but well-known risks). Our clarion call to them was dedicate time, energy and focus to deliver day 1 but then take some time as the new council ‘top team’ to look forward collectively to ensure they plan properly together to thrive and succeed as a new council. It will be important for the new council to measure itself against those key LGR outcomes and equally its new Council Plan priorities. We stressed the need, especially after the tier 2 and 3 appointments, to do what we described as ‘stop, think and create your new capacity.’ That will be very important in the period between now and 1 April 2023 since there are key issues to

address and establish clarity on, that will help Somerset leaders move from vesting day to the medium-term development of the new Somerset Council, including:

- Establishing a robust budget for 2023/24 and medium-term financial plan - ensuring this is collectively owned and communicated
- Capacity, focus and workforce to ensure business as usual but then also the ability to describe, plan for, and then deliver transformation ambitions
- Clarity of purpose around the infrastructure, support and challenge to guide the new council – such as having an effective communication capacity, or having an effective scrutiny function into the future, that keeps focussed on ensuring the benefits from LGR are delivered
- Clear plans and milestones for a range of key issues e.g. structure and organisation of the planning function, delivery of a Local Plan, ensuring effective support to your 110 members

3. Key reflections and peer suggestions

This is not a Corporate Peer Challenge Report and we do not expect Somerset Council to respond with an action plan or equivalent to any specific peer team recommendations.

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main findings and indeed feedback sections of the report. The following bullet points summarise the main ones and are intended as a mix of issues to bear in mind as the change process to the new council continues, or as additional actions we would suggest as helpful.

- Articulate your vision – we heard that the political administration has a vision and sense of priority activity for the new council; this now needs to be made explicit and socialised.
- Be explicit in your commitment to engage partners from all sectors in the co-production and co-design of policies, structures etc in the new council.
- Stop, think and create space as your council ‘top team’—when key senior positions have been filled ensuring you create organisational time and space

to consider ways in which the new council will thrive into the future.

- Ensure robust finance plans are in place and widely understood – providing clarity on the accurate current budget position and how this could impact on the functionality of the new council.
- Make sure you allow sufficient time for tranche 2 and make the right appointments to deliver your new plan and culture
- Don't underestimate the time needed for stabilisation – this will inevitably go beyond 6 months and may even last a full electoral cycle for ambitions to be fully realised.
- Keep resolutely focussed at delivering the one council ethos and culture, throughout the new council and with your partners
- Ensure you have the necessary capacity in the new council to ensure effective communication, internally as well as externally
- Establish clear transition milestones – ensure sufficient capacity to support transition – this will help avoid the risk that key systems and policies (e.g. Local Plans) are not aligned as quickly as some may expect.
- Settle on the geography, structure and initial resourcing (people and budget) of the LCNs before vesting day, so they can be up and running from day 1
- Develop a strong package of support and engagement with and for your members, including an effective member development programme

4. Summary of the peer challenge approach

4.1. The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Cllr Liz Green – Royal Borough Kingston Upon Thames (Liberal Democrat)
- Cllr Alan Jarrett – Leader, Medway Council (Conservative)
- Lorraine O'Donnell – Chief Executive of Cheshire East Council

- Sophie Hosking – Strategic Director of Neighbourhoods – Cornwall Council
- George Candler – Executive Director of Place and Economy and Deputy Chief Executive – North Northants Council
- Emily McGuinness – Senior Regional Advisor for the SW, LGA
- Paul Clarke – Principal Advisor for the SW, LGA

4.2. Scope and focus

As outlined in section 1 above, this peer challenge was specifically aimed to help prepare, what will be the new Somerset Council as it starts to operate as a Unitary council, replacing the existing county council and 4 districts from April 2023.

To gain the maximum benefit from such a peer challenge, we agreed with the stakeholders in Somerset, that the peer team would offer their perspective on the challenges and opportunities they saw as a group of experienced peers, who had direct relevant experience of working in or with new unitary councils, around 3 key areas. These were:

- Preparedness for day 1-vesting day
- Preparedness for day 2 and beyond
- Making the most of Local Community Networks (a key feature of the LGR Business case).

The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were as familiar as they could be with the relevant issues in the lead up to Local Government Reorganisation in Somerset. Over the course of just 2 days the team:

- Engaged with nearly 75 councillors, officers, and partners (albeit that given the nature of the challenge, it was largely internally focussed) across a mix of interviews and focus groups, as well as background reading and some pre-engagement with relevant senior officer and member stakeholders.
- Collectively spending over 110 hours to arrive at our findings, the equivalent of one person spending 2 weeks in Somerset.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

5. Feedback on core areas of review

5.1. Preparedness for day 1, Vesting day

The councils in Somerset have made good preparation in readiness to set up a new safe and legally functioning council from 1 April 2023. As long as they mitigate against the impact of the risks that have been clearly identified, stakeholders should rightly have confidence about getting the new authority 'over the line'.

The 'glue' that holds all of that together is a sound programme management architecture. The LGR programme at Somerset is well defined, with numerous workstreams, with for the most part, clear outcomes. It was described as a 'touchstone' by one stakeholder when they told us about how they were preparing for LGR, meaning it was a template for how a significant change programme should be done. We heard from others and reflected back from our own peer team experience of unitarisation that the programme is well led, there is clarity of purpose and clear deliverables, the team is knowledgeable, it is adequately resourced, they 'know their stuff' and there are impressive levels of programme rigour, governance and assurance.

The attributes above are important to reflect on, as they start to describe the elements of a sound change management programme and it is only when such attributes are missing or cease that their absence lays bare problems and things falter. The peer team advise that it is important that such discipline remains intact at

Somerset and helps support the delivery of not only day 1, but also a period of stabilisation and then change and transformation into a fully functioning council delivering against its ambitions. Based upon their knowledge and experience of LGR, the peers felt that keeping this resolute focus on programme delivery, whilst delivering Business as Usual and change is key. We described it as ‘fixing the engine whilst at the same time driving the car’; the new council will need to twin track this for some time after vesting day.

That challenge to maintain effective oversight and delivery is often more difficult when moving through important milestones of change, one of which will be the forthcoming recruitment to tier 2 and 3 senior officer posts in the new council, which will occupy most of January 2023. Everyone recognises why this has needed to come as late in as it has, so close to the council starting, and that council is confident it can make appointments, but there are clearly risks associated which need to be taken into account, if this isn’t as successful as hoped for.

Furthermore, a further key element in respect of the appointments will be how the Programme Office works with and eventually through those new appointees to in effect ‘handover’ the evolution of a thriving new council.

The senior members we spoke to clearly felt engaged in and therefore invested in the programme. That comes right from the council’s cabinet and is embodied in the LGR portfolio holder. That relationship with leading members and the Programme Team and especially the LGR Programme Director has been a real success – he is trusted and well respected.

The appointment of the new chief executive and his impact should not be understated. Whilst the LGR programme has been a fundamental driver in helping the council be ready for vesting day, everyone was clear that it needed the additional drive the Chief Executive has brought. As said, of equal importance is the appointment to the next 2 tiers of senior officers in the council, as they will be the key people to ‘role model’, the aspirations of the chief executive to embody a One council culture from day 1.

Change is challenging, but through this particular process it will be important to celebrate and utilise the legacies of the respective councils, making sure the new council holds onto the best. This is also important in the member arena – we were

left wondering whether all members fully embraced the one council/ one voice ethos and are prepared to leave their district/county council badges behind? This will be a challenge, but it is important to look forward.

During the preparation for day 1, the respective councils have not just 'lifted and shifted' existing systems and processes. We heard about real progress being made with critical systems already in place ahead of Vesting Day e.g. payroll, and with new systems due to go live on Vesting Day, e.g. a new finance system. Clearly, especially with the finance system there will be 'risks in respect of this, but we fully expect the council to be doubling down on areas such as this. What is clear is these are all signs of the importance of one new council.

Our peer challenge did not take an in depth look at the new council's finances. However, when we met colleagues in Somerset, we did discuss the implications for the contextual issues bearing down nationally, as well as the local issues of change and the complexity for reconciling and effectively forecasting and budgeting for 5 councils coming into one. What we heard from different key stakeholders was different stories about the current budget position, the narrative behind this and the future budget opportunities and challenges. Our clear advice is, as soon as possible, have an accurate as possible budget position going into 2023/24, with an equally clear view as to how this will impact on deliverability of services and the ambition of the new administration. This is mission critical and how this is tackled across the new council will be a hugely important issue and send out a real signal of the way the council deals with such matters across the piece.

We were told by the council stakeholders that their way of working will be to engage with partners and communities. We only spoke with a small number of third sector partners plus Somerset Association for Local Councils, but it was very clear they would welcome opportunities to co-produce design elements of the new authority, beyond the Local Community Networks (which we cover in 5.3). When we fed this back these sentiments to the council's leaders, they absolutely welcomed this. And so now is the time to really bring that partner engagement into the LGR programme and embrace a culture of co-production.

Our final reflection in respect of day 1 readiness is best captured by a quote from one of those people we spoke with "We don't have the answers to everything ahead of

day one, but we know what matters most.”

5.2. Stabilisation to transformation – delivering a functioning and effective council into the medium term

The peer team were not convinced that the ‘day 2’ terminology which is used regularly in Somerset is as helpful as it can be. As the heading above says, in reality this will essentially be about delivering a functioning, effective, and thriving council into the medium term. The experience of the peers was most useful here, they all said that in their experience, their own councils respective change processes had underestimated the actual time that was needed for simply stabilising things - that will not just be six months, but may well be 18-24 months and to carry on with the car fixing analogy, transformation plans for the longer term for the next 5 years and beyond should be being developed and rolled out whilst that strong footing is being established.

Below we have captured by theme and in bullet points some key advice and thoughts we verbally fed back to help the new council stand up as effectively as possible into the medium term.

Vision/Ambition

- We beg a question as to how elected members are shaping transformational priorities post vesting day? The peer team encourage Somerset Council to articulate that vision for the future of your council/your county and how outcomes for local people will be improved. We think this is a priority strand of work and one that will require significant partner engagement to ensure authenticity and collective ownership.
- The LGR programme has rightly been acknowledged as a real catalyst for change and improvement. That will help you get ‘over the line’, but what about future plans? We didn’t hear enough about whether as part of this, there is clear milestones in place for key transition activities e.g. developing the Local Plan, the finalisation and effective communication of the Council Plan, the future governance and scrutiny plans etc. Giving further thought now to developing a wider Transformation Plan for Somerset Council would be helpful, especially as

some of this would have been already captured in the various workstreams, where these teams will understand where the opportunities exist.

- The new unitary council will be standing up at a time of change for local government heralded by the Levelling Up agenda and emerging legislation. It will be *crucial* the new council does not miss opportunities that could be available to them – establishing a position and starting dialogue especially around Devolution deals with central government will need to start sooner rather than later.

Culture/Staffing

- You could probably write the following in respect of any change process, in any council i.e. *there is still more to do on culture to ensure you promote and deliver a One Council ethos.* However, the peers thought this was doubly important here in Somerset because the Change Order designated Somerset County Council as a continuing authority' In the two days the peer team were 'on site' in Somerset we heard loud and clear that there is a current perception of 'winners and losers', those 'touched' by LGR and those 'untouched' and even where because of historical decisions some staff's current roles do not readily 'map across' into the ringfences and new role profiles. We cannot stress how important this issue is to address.
- Alongside the above there is a very important message from the peer team in respect of the need for clarity of messaging and engagement around operational delivery and organisational change. The delivery of 'the day job' is key through day 1 and beyond – residents will want to see a seamless service. So irrespective of what jobs are being done by whom, or how and when they will be 'touched' by the LGR process it is so important to keep staff engaged, informed and reassured
- Earlier in this report we described that balance that is required between the shift of leadership and management accountability as the tiers 2-3, and then other tiers of staff, are finally appointed into their new council roles. Being crystal clear about the transition arrangements and how incoming senior leaders will take ownership of cultural and operational change is a key message the peer team wanted to feedback
- The roles, relationships and culture of member/officer relations across the 5 legacy authorities should not be underestimated. Members in some districts will

have had a very different relationship with some of their officers than perhaps at county level. What is key here is that this is proactively addressed and aspirations and expectations for practical and effective future member/officer relationships are agreed and developed

- Recruitment and retention challenges are prevalent across the sector but have greater profile at Somerset given the change process. It will be very important to review the risks that are, or could be carried forward, firstly in respect of being able to appoint the right staff and then around vacancy levels, especially for some professional roles and high cost of agency staff
- We pose the following question for reflection only, based upon our limited engagement, but, can the new council engage more effectively with its recognised Trade Unions, we wondered? We got the impression that there was work to do to engage them more effectively in matters that had a direct impact upon their membership e.g. harmonisation of terms of conditions

Members

- It was very encouraging to engage with the senior members we did, both within the administration, but the opposition too. It struck the peer team that there are several senior Members who are very good ambassadors for speaking for that one council ethos - that's a great message for the public, for the staff and across the membership as a whole
- On the other side of the coin, the peer team did not see that there was/will be structured support to members e.g. support for a case management system and that is something to reflect upon
- Furthermore, we also did not hear clarity as to whether there was an on-going member development programme to support members through the transition period and ensure they are supported and equipped to do their role to the best of their abilities – we suggested using a set of key competencies perhaps, to help structure this. The LGA can offer some support and advice in this space
- Likewise, and we know in 2 days we couldn't cover everything, but we didn't hear enough about how the new council will make the new governance arrangements work – clearly it will be important to utilise the best of what you have had from

your legacy council's scrutiny and your focus on LGR scrutiny going forward.

Communication

- During our time in Somerset the new council brand went live; it was good to see, read and hear how it had generally landed positively. This is the start of a journey to effectively communicate the key attributes and priorities of this new council.
- The peer team were impressed by the additional capacity and expertise that had been invested into the programme to ensure the effective delivery of day 1 services for a new council from 1 April 2023. We were less clear about the future communication plans and capacity going forward. We think this is very important for the new council to reflect upon and plan for. There will be much to attend to, with a new vision, council plan, delivering sound internal communications, working effectively with partners and communities etc. These things will be mission critical to the effective running and reputation of the new council.

Transition

- We have highlighted several times in this report the time needed for stabilisation – which we have estimated, based upon our peer team experience to be 18-24 months.
- Because of the above, and what will be a pressing need to both transform services and make efficiencies, this balance between running a stable council, with sufficient capacity to deliver, and the need to improve and drive out savings will need to be struck
- It will be very useful to revisit the council in 2024 as part of its first Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) and test out the five core areas that each CPC looks at and address within that the themes, issues and questions highlighted within this report

5.3. Developing Effective Local Community Networks

An important message from this peer challenge was the consensus and agreement we found with many tenets of the LGR change process. In respect of Local Community Networks that shone through again from everyone we spoke with, and this was no surprise given it was a key element of both original business cases.

That's a key message for the council and its key stakeholders; LCNs are universally welcomed. The issue is more about the 'how and to do what?' as the peer team couldn't establish clarity nor consensus from stakeholders about LCN's role, function and purpose. They are not yet well defined and given they start on 1 April 2023 that is an issue that must be addressed.

The original business cases described the potential for what they can be. The model proposed in the original Business Case assumes the creation of new local community networks (LCNs) to promote active community decision making, scrutiny, ensure local influence over council and wider public service activity, and to inspire more responsibility for local place-shaping. It is envisaged that the new council would work with parishes and towns to create 15 to 20 LCNs during the implementation period. These would draw on local learning and positive experiences over the last decade from councils such as Wiltshire and Cornwall, plus more recently in the new unitary council in Buckinghamshire. Every part of the new authority, whether urban or rural, would be in an LCN area. Every part of the new authority would have a strong local voice.

Given the lack of consensus and many diverse views we heard from stakeholders in respect of role and function, and indeed potential governance, the peer team feel it is important that a) they start with a small but clear remit e.g. as a minimum we would suggest a Chair and clear terms of reference, b) from the outset there is a description of what they are not, almost as much as what they are, c) there is clarity about their existing geography/boundary but a commitment to flex and review as they develop is built in— setting in place a roadmap to help describe how that might happen and d) resources are allocated from the outset.

Given what we have said earlier in this report in respect of the VCS, there really is a great potential here to work across services and partners e.g. health, police. (We did not engage with a wider group of external stakeholders as part of this peer challenge).

Furthermore, it will be very important that the new Somerset Council will have to develop a new two-way relationship with town and parish councils and LCNs. This is not an either/or issue and the risk that some stakeholders think that Town and Parish Councils only way to engage with the new unitary is through LCNs needs to be

addressed.

Whilst there is not yet consensus of the role and function of Somerset's LCNs, evidence from similar arrangements in other councils show that they can be capable of addressing local service delivery issues and concerns with Town and Parish councils as well as providing a forum for engagement and development of strategic plans for the area. As mentioned above it will be important to set out clearly the various different functions and products of the LCNs e.g. engagement and communication; problem solving; local strategic planning; budget distribution (e.g. for traffic schemes); Members' community grants etc.

We picked up an understandable concern regarding the limited time to achieve member and stakeholder buy-in for implementation by vesting day. However, our strong message, based upon the experience of peers who have been in new Unitary authorities that have established such forums, is that this is a 'journey' and does not need to be fully thought through and implemented on day 1.

In the peer teams' efforts to help the range of issues around LCN move forward, we are feeding back below a list of our suggestions to establish LCNs well for vesting day and then a further list for their evolution over time. Some of these have already been covered but for convenience they are summarised below.

Essential for Day 1:

- Define your original structure and boundaries – use line of 'best fit' and settle on this asap backed by evidence base (ward, parliamentary, town and parish boundaries, PCNs, travel to work etc).
- The boundaries can also be 'fuzzy or flexible' - there is and should be potential to work across LCN boundaries on issues that span boundaries .
- Also there here is the potential for 'tweaking' following Boundary Commission reviews – this could help you reach consensus for the structure for now if people realise it's not necessarily set in stone forever.
- Allocate dedicated resources – LCNs won't work without dedicated resource. (We heard that a £900k budget had been requested– we advise this is given serious consideration. We also believe there is the potential to repurpose some current district council budgets e.g. community development – so explore and then build

these in from 2023

- Confirmation of starting functions from day 1 is important – say what it is and what it isn't from the outset so that confusion is resolved – use your learning from the pilots.
- Members need support and preparation before key decision points in the new year – work with Executive and Group Leaders - they need support to see how LCNs will evolve. Use Member advocates from the pilots to 'colour in' the proposal e.g. highways pilot – demonstrable reduction in Member post bag.
- Bring the role of Members on LCNs to life – key forum for them to connect to their communities and key enabler for community leadership role e.g. Member budgets for grants, local highways schemes etc.

Evolution of LCNs following Vesting Day

- Establish specific plans for powers, functions, decision making and budgets and appropriate governance. Currently work has been paused on this.
- Consider a range of potential products – Local Strategy Plans, using community data and local evidence base, engagement forum, local member budgets, a forum for convening services to find local solutions for local issues.
- What is your future aspiration for service delivery? Might that be an LCN led, hub-based model of local service delivery aligned with PCNs? If so, then this needs to be better articulated, the fact the council has a positive relationship with the newly established ICB/ICS and both Adult Social Care and Children's Services are keen to engage means this is not a standing start.

6. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss, and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge and look forward to working with Somerset Council as it

commences in April 2023. The council's political and officer leadership has already committed to having a Corporate Peer Challenge within the first 12-18 months of its inception – this is very positive.

In the meantime, Paul Clarke, Principal Adviser for Southwest, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Paul is available to discuss any further support the council requires. paul.clarke@local.gov.uk